

## Civil War Book Review

---

Fall 2001

Article 2

---

### Immortal Image: Harold Holzer Reflects On Representations Of Lincoln

Bonnie L. Bates

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

---

#### Recommended Citation

Bates, Bonnie L. (2001) "Immortal Image: Harold Holzer Reflects On Representations Of Lincoln," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 4 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol3/iss4/2>

## Interview

### IMMORTAL IMAGE: HAROLD HOLZER REFLECTS ON REPRESENTATIONS OF LINCOLN

Bates, Bonnie L.

Fall 2001

*Civil War Book Review (cwbr): What inspired you to re-release The Lincoln Image (University of Illinois Press, ISBN0252026691, \$30.00 hardcover), 16 years after its original publication?*

**Harold Holzer(hh):** For years my co-author and good friend, Gabor Boritt, has been trying to arrange a reprint of this book. Professor Boritt, who teaches at Gettysburg College, noted a steady increase in requests for the title. The book went out of print years ago, and the original publisher lost the plates. We had to wait for new techniques that allowed illustrated books to be copied without the original plates or film. We appreciate the irony here: it took new picture technologies to facilitate the re-appearance of this study of old picture technologies. And it took the enthusiasm of the University of Illinois Press.

*cwbr: How does The Lincoln Image fit in with the two other books that you have collaborated on with Gabor Boritt and Mark Neely Jr.?*

**hh:** *The Lincoln Image* was our first effort to focus attention on these rather forgotten sources of history. We planned the sequel as a further exploration. Later, we did a long piece for the Winterthur Portfolio on the European image of Lincoln-also conceived as part of our ongoing look at Lincoln iconography. Finally, we did *The Confederate Image* (University of North Carolina Press, ISBN 0807849057, \$27.95 hardcover). I can't say that we sat down 18 years ago and plotted out a series of five books. We inspired ourselves, and were encouraged by others, along the way. Last year, Mark E. Neely Jr. and I came out with yet another study, *The Union Image* (University of North Carolina Press, ISBN 0807825107, \$45.00 hardcover), which is a companion book of sorts to *The Confederate Image*. Thirteen years and many other projects separated them; it was one of our readers, George Craig of the Civil War Round

Table of New York, who said we had to do that book. Mark and I looked at each other and said: why didn't we think of that?

***cwbr: Which of the many representations of Lincoln do you find most appealing from an artistic standpoint? What about from an historical one? Is there an image you consider especially influential?***

**hh:** From an artistic standpoint I have always loved G.P.A. Healy's painting, a dignified but animated profile, captured him beautifully on the cusp between his candidacy and his presidency, between frontier vitality and Civil War-era sorrows. Of course the old five-dollar bill portrait—that is, the photo that inspired it, and inspired hundreds of adaptations—had a big impact. It was made at Mathew Brady's studio on February 9, 1864, just a few days before Lincoln's 55th birthday. Robert Lincoln thought it was the best picture ever made of his father. From a historical point of view, the most influential was Francis B. Carpenter's painting of the first reading of the Emancipation Proclamation. It was adapted into a best-selling print that stayed in circulation for generations, and brilliantly celebrated the most important act of the Lincoln administration. For direct influence, Carpenter wins every time for his emancipation and family scenes. The day Lincoln hired Carpenter as a virtual artist-in-residence was a major turning point in the making of Lincoln's reputation. Lincoln could not have done better had he hired the most expensive public relations counselor of the 21st century. I think Lincoln at least suspected something important was being produced, or else he would not have granted Carpenter as much time as he did.

***cwbr: How did this imagery affect the attitudes of the American public?***

**hh:** There is no question that Lincoln needed to be introduced to the electorate in 1860. He was all but unknown when he was nominated for the presidency. Rumors about his homeliness were not helping him. Engravers and lithographers, often using the work of period photographers as models, helped make Lincoln palatable as a candidate, and also transformed him into an icon that symbolized limitless American opportunity—the rail-splitter who had risen to his full potential under our unique system. Later, pictures helped transfigure Lincoln yet again into Father Abraham, the Great Emancipator, and the martyr to the Union he helped save. We know how highly Americans regarded these seemingly primitive pictures. They placed them in the most sacred spots in their homes: above the mantel in the parlor. I don't have proof that anyone ever said,

"I'm voting for Lincoln because of that terrific picture!" But who among modern Americans will admit he chose a candidate because of a fabulous TV commercial?

***cwbr: Do you think Lincoln images changed the public's view of him as an individual or as a politician?***

**hh:** They provided strong reinforcement of both images: private and public. The racist cartoons that appeared during the 1864 presidential campaign reflected, and perhaps influenced, the deep divisions within the American electorate about the cause of Emancipation. The artist Carpenter also popularized the family image of Lincoln. Such pictures suggested to many Americans haunted by Lincoln's wartime sacrifices that he had somehow enjoyed the comforts of home during those brutal days. The image may have been exaggerated, but it was undeniably powerful and is still with us: we continue to debate Lincoln's claim to the title of the Great Emancipator, and the cult of the First Family remains as powerful as ever.

***cwbr: A number of the works were reissued repeatedly, updated occasionally with the addition of a beard, for example. Was this a common practice at the time?***

**hh:** It had been done before, but Lincoln and American printmaking more or less came of age together, and the practice grew exponentially during the Civil War. Prints of old Mexican War-era heroes were reissued with new heads; beardless pictures of men like Lincoln, Lee, and Jackson were updated. One publisher in Ohio issued about 50 portraits of Union military heroes, utilizing only five or six bodies, on which were grafted interchangeable portraits to meet regional sales demand. The most politically incorrect example is probably that of the John C. Calhoun portrait that morphed into a Lincoln portrait, flowing robes and all, Unionist replacing secessionist.

***cwbr: How did representations of Lincoln change from election to assassination?***

**hh:** Once he won, he changed his image by growing whiskers. Printmakers responded by issuing more avuncular and dignified portraits, which depict a man more prepared to lead a nation in crisis than the log cabin-born rail-splitter.

Actually, once the war began, the public clamored less for Lincoln pictures than for those of new military heroes like McClellan. Lincoln only regained pictorial prominence with the Emancipation Proclamation and his decision to run for re-election in 1864. But once he was martyred, there was an explosion of demand for pictures: heroic portraits, deathbed scenes, even retrospective pictures that suggested he was an active military leader. Perhaps the best example of this iconographical transformation can be found in pictures showing Lincoln side-by-side in a kind of imaginary secular afterworld with George Washington-the father and savior of the country together. No one had ever been portrayed as Washington's equal. Such prints elevated Lincoln to the status of American deity.

***cwbr: The book includes both early photographs and non-photographic illustrations. Within decades, photographs would subsume most other forms of representation. From the perspective of art history what significance do you ascribe to this phenomenon?***

**hh:** Americans thirst for change, and I'm not sure such evolutions have or require a rationale based on art history. People stopped displaying prints on their walls when wall calendars came into vogue and sort of cheapened the genre. Carte-de-visite photos yielded to cabinet photos and ultimately to the Kodak revolution, after which family pictures became more important than celebrity pictures. I'm not sure whether any American political hero has been showcased in family parlors since the death of Kennedy. But Jennifer Lopez and Tiger Woods are alive and well on posters in our teen-agers' bedrooms, I'm reliably informed. Then again, most young people these days get images off the World Wide Web. So there have been technological and sociological revolutions conspiring to subsume the antique world of prints.

***cwbr: Are there any plans for an exhibition of Lincoln images?***

**hh:** When we first issued *The Lincoln Image*, we curated a companion exhibition of prints that ran at the Lincoln Museum, Gettysburg College, and all sorts of venues-Chicago, Providence, and other places. And just a few years ago, the Lincoln Museum asked me to serve as guest curator for a show of Lincoln paintings and sculpture from life. I would love to do another exhibit and perhaps a TV documentary. These pictures are more than mere illustrations; they are pieces of history, and it's well worth reminding ourselves of the influence they once wielded. Lincoln once looked at a new sculpture and said: "There is the

animal himself." And what an influence the Lincoln animal himself, and his face, had.